

## **Leaving Well (If you're going to go, go!)**

I've been consulting with several clergy who are contemplating leaving their ministry settings. It's not unusual for these consultations to come in waves, and it's always interesting that they do. It seems that issues, crises, and topics have their seasons. I've not yet learned to read the signs in the wind or in the patterns of the clouds to know how to anticipate when that phenomenon happens, I just accept that these things "come in threes" – as they say—or fives or sixes.

I've heard from maternity unit nurses that they experience the same phenomenon—things are quiet for a spell and, then, there's a little serial population explosion. And when I managed a funeral home it was the same: all quiet for a while and then St. Peter seemed to throw open the Pearly Gates and we'd get a string of calls. I sometimes wondered if there was a correlation between the infant population explosion and the exit of souls from the planet. Somebody ought to do a study on that.

As I've observed clergy working through the issues of leaving their congregations I've noticed some common issues. Whether the clergy are leaving under duress or because they feel stirrings of restlessness, certain issues seem common to the nature of leaving regardless of the circumstances. Leaving a congregation involves the murky process of discernment, and clarity rarely comes instantly or easily. In many cases I've witnessed clergy who have left their congregations emotionally before they began thinking consciously about leaving.

In most cases the discernment process involves getting clear about what counts as something to factor into the decision and what can be dismissed as inconsequential. In the early stages of discernment that is not easy to do. At those stages everything seems as important as everything else and so the feeling is one of "being stuck."

There's no shortcut to the discernment process. Primarily because it's as much an emotional process as it is an intellectual one. In fact, in my experience, rationality rarely is of real significance in decisions about staying or leaving, as much as we'd like to believe otherwise. If it were as simple as "doing the math" we wouldn't have as much trouble reaching a point of decision, nor experience as much angst as we do.

While there is no shortcut to discernment about leaving a congregation, and insight comes in its own time, here are some points of consideration related to the issues I see common when trying to leave well. These aren't easy, for they are often contrary to how most clergy seem to approach the issue:

- **Don't plan for the congregation's future.** When it's time for you to leave a congregation shorten your vision. Concentrate on leaving well and give the congregation's future to the congregation—it's no longer your responsibility. To be blunt, once you decide to leave your congregation's future is none of your business.
- **If you're going to go, go.** You don't need to burn your bridges, but you need to get clear about what leaving means. Most clergy seem to do well once they get clear. For example, they will communicate with their congregation that when they leave they are no longer the "pastor". So they'll not make pastoral calls, conduct weddings and funerals, or get involved in church business. Clergy who are not able to "go" tend to become the bane of the "new pastor" and often do a great disservice to the congregation. It's amazing how many clergy have trouble "leaving" their congregations. Sometimes they try to come back as "members". But I've yet to see a former pastor of a congregation able to successfully return to their former congregation as "just a member". It seems hard for them to appreciate that they weren't "just a member" before, and never will be.
- **As you are leaving the function of your preaching needs to change.** That change in function is primarily one of prophetic theological hope. This isn't the time to try to plant insight into your congregation—if they didn't get what you've been trying to say all those years they're certainly not going to "get it now. They're listening to you differently. What they want to hear, and need to hear, is the affirmation of hope that they'll be just fine without you!
- **The second function of preaching at this time is to remind them of their story.** Clergy often are the resident storytellers of the narrative history of the congregation. Too often a congregation experiences an episode of corporate amnesia when a pastor leaves. Now is the time to tell, and retell, the story of the congregation as a local people of God. Remind them of how they came to be, who they were, and who they are.
- **Stay connected.** One common emotional response of clergy who are leaving is to emotionally defect in place and begin to "disconnect" from their congregation. That's understandable and may be a function of anticipatory grieving. But clergy need to work at staying emotionally connected to significant persons in the congregation—its leaders as well as others worth investing time with.
- **Work on your grieving.** Leaving a congregation, under whatever circumstance, involves loss, and loss requires grieving. Own it. Find ways to mourn appropriately (mourning is the outward expression of grieving), but don't confuse your grieving with that of the congregations'.

- **Focus on your own vision and work on your own self.** I've mentioned that in the early stages of discernment it is difficult to sift the important from the insignificant. In the midst of the fog of discernment I've seen clergy get stuck by weighing in, with equal weight, issues like, the children (even when they are grown!), the house, their age, the spouse (his or her job, friends, hobbies, etc.), giving up a short commute, the club, the salary, a perk, their nice office, the computer the church provided, etc. To be sure these are all important—but they are not as important as pursuing your own vision, calling, and goals. Change involves risk and it involves loss. As someone said, you can have anything you want, but you cannot have everything you want. The question becomes, “What are you willing to give up in order to pursue your calling, vision, dreams, or desires?”

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